

ENQUIRY

Volumes 1-2
1942-1945

With an Introduction by

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Introduction

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Introduction

A little over a quarter of a century ago the best laid plans of both reformers and radicals were submerged in a tide of patriotism, militarism and war-boom industrialism. In such unpromising times, *Enquiry* made its brief, brave appearance in the world. It was a journal that did not "rest on the assurance provided by any dogmatic political code" and was "not an organ of another sect, with a special political ax to grind," but was, as its subtitle suggested, committed to "independent radical thought." To the extent that its editors adhered to any specific political allegiance, it was "socialism," a term not always holding the same meaning for all of the contributors.

The editors of *Enquiry* were intent upon producing a journal of high intellectual calibre. Their self-conscious efforts in that direction sometimes resulted in mishaps of this sort: "Rather than hypostasizing goodness as a quality which by hypothesis some men must possess, let it be remembered that . . .," and "If left-wing thinkers make pregnant contributions to the study of the shifting character of trade unions under the pressure of social forces, they seem unable to escape a species of functional opportunism flowing from untenable psychological. . . ." These and other such lapses demonstrate that the infusion of academic jargon into lay journals—believed to be a phenomenon that began in the 1950's with the popularization of the social sciences—was already well under way in 1941.

But lest the reader be tempted to discard this volume on that account, I would hasten to add that pedantic and stylistic sins are not chronic herein; both the writing and the editing of *Enquiry* improve noticeably after the first few issues. Moreover, the influence of the academy is visible in other more salutary ways. There are passing references to Durkheim, Mannheim, Cooley, Mead, and above all to Michels, along with discussions on science, truth, and philosophy in which the names of Morris R. Cohen, Ernest Nagel, Nietzsche, Kant (and of course, Hegel and Marx) are displayed. John Dewey earns special coverage, understandably so if one recalls his influence at the University of Chicago and the close connection many of *Enquiry's* writers had with that institution.

Reading this volume reminds us that in radical politics, as in life itself, swift and dramatic changes leave many things unchanged, and much of what we consider to be "new developments" are really the re-emergence of old ones. Readers who have been exposed to the protests of today's radicals will recognize familiar

themes. There is, for instance, the same disillusionment with liberal reformers who, operating "through the regular respectable legalist channels" (better known today as "the power structure"), are more concerned with "getting something done" than with offering any real and comprehensive solution to deep-seated social problems, liberals who believe they are exercising political power while, in fact, they "putter in its shadow" as servants and brokers.

Just as today's radical, and not-so-radical, observers see an already paltry "Great Society" program sacrificed to the Vietnam war, so *Enquiry's* writers saw World War II as ending whatever reformist momentum the New Deal had possessed. Roosevelt's Administration had never promised the kind of action these radicals envisioned but they were willing to admit it had introduced "basic changes in American life." It had mediated class antagonisms and stabilized a tottering capitalist system by offering some concessions to organized workers. But by 1942-43, the editors were able to conclude that the New Deal "fiasco is now complete." Reform had been shoved aside as government and business marshalled the resources of the nation for war and profit.

Those of us who assume that all leftists in the 1940's supported America's struggle against fascism will discover that *Enquiry's* writers were opposed to American intervention in the European and Pacific wars. In their view, fascist and Western capitalist combatants were motivated by the same imperialistic impulses. Today the horrific revelations of Auschwitz and Buchenwald no longer allow us the opinion that Hitler was just another chauvinistic imperialist aggrandizer, no better or worse than his adversaries. Most of today's radicals are more selective in their objections to war. Their opposition to the Vietnam war stems not from any carte blanche socialist pacifism, but from moral outrage against America's involvement.

For all its opposition to the war, *Enquiry* gives little attention to the growth of the military's political and social influence in American society; the armed services were considered merely an arm of the corporate-bureaucratic interests running the war. Today, we are in a better position to appreciate the enormous growth in independent power and prestige enjoyed by the Pentagon, the origins of which *Enquiry's* writers were witnessing but could not fully anticipate.

In other areas *Enquiry* was quite prescient. Long before the popular sociology the 1950's alerted us to "Big Bureaucracy," the "Lonely Crowd," and the "Organization Man," the journal was concerning itself with the socio-political evils of all large-scale social processes; thus, organizations produced "consequences wholly unintended and undesired, which thwart the will of those who initiate cooperative effort." The many critical references to the loss of democratic idealism characterizing such disparate organizations as the Bolshevik party and the American trade unions indicate that *Enquiry's* writers were devout students of Michels and were gravely concerned about the ubiquitous tendencies of oligarchy.

Any discussion of yesterday's radicals brings to mind comparisons with today's protestors. The similarities and differences, and the reactions of the elder radical generation, might be worth pondering for a moment. In their indifference to doctrine, their uncompromising criticism of the liberal establishment, their opposition to an ongoing war, their distrust of organizational structures, and their desire for "social revolution," *Enquiry's* contributors have much in common with the young radicals of the 1960's. Yet today many of the older leftists have greeted the New Left with something less than uncritical applause. Some, like Irving Howe and Dwight Macdonald, argue that the young protestors are either saying nothing new or saying and doing everything wrong.

Today's radicals brought forth their own leaders, founded their own publications, and have won—for better or worse—national attention and exposure in the mass media. While older leftist intellectuals, including many who contributed to *Enquiry*, spoke of the necessity for "social action," it was the New Left that acted—in the Mississippi delta, the urban ghettos, on college campuses, and in anti-war movements throughout the nation.

For anyone with a sense of history, the outdated ideas found in *Enquiry* are as interesting as those that are still timely. One is struck, for instance, by the hopeful attention accorded the "working class." For all their disillusionment with trade union leadership, these writers still placed their faith in the revolutionary potential of labor's rank-and-file, and envisioned the post-war emergence of an "independent labor action" in the economic and political realms. This touching faith in the proletariat was understandable enough. After all, a revolution without the "working masses" was simply not a revolution. Today's radicals viewing conservatism as characteristic of labor's leaders and its rank-and-file, seem to put their hopes on the more politically conscious elements among students, intellectuals, and racial minorities.

For all their desire to propagate an inclusive radicalism, *Enquiry's* contributors betray a rather marked anti-communism—as pronounced as any found among more orthodox Americans. One writer speaks of "the Communist Party and its various hacks" and characterizes the Soviet demand for German reparations as a "new high in crassness—even for the Soviets." The years of dedicated effort by Communist union organizers are reduced to "manipulation in the interests of the Kremlin"—in the phrase of another writer. Several contributors equate "Stalinism" with "Fascism" without qualification, and another mentions the "urgent necessity for politically annihilating the Communist Party . . .," presumably by non-coercive peaceful competition. Having had the benefit of twenty years of obsessional cold-war anti-communism, today's radicals show a great reluctance to join in the red-baiting, and do not nurse the kind of resentment toward Communists or the Soviet Union displayed by the old Socialist radicals.

Few of the articles in *Enquiry* grapple with the question of *how* social revolution is to be effected. One writer, Mulford Sibley, offers some interesting observations on the subject. For him, history demonstrates that revolutions cannot be achieved by working within a legal system that is geared to the preservation of the ongoing social structure. Those who attempt to do so eventually succumb to the dictates and limitations of the system, and even if they gain nominal political authority, it is only as a component of the controlling institutions of property and class. For Sibley and several other contributors, violence is equally self-defeating either because revolutionary instruments of violence are vastly inferior to those of the state, or because even the successful acquisition and maintenance of power by means of violence makes the revolutionary dependent on his oppressive apparatus and blinds him to his original goals.

What method then is open to those who want both to avoid the seductions of the present legal-political order and eschew violence? Writing two decades before the civil rights sit-ins, Sibley offers an instrument of power for the powerless: civil disobedience. Passive peaceful resistance to the legal order makes the resistant a target of the state's oppression, but "the psychological power of non-retaliatory suffering is considerable." One wonders. The experiences of the civil rights and peace movements in the 1960's have brought much official brutality, beatings and jailings, but whether the soul and conscience of America has been aroused is another question. More often than not sympathy has been with the forces of "law and order."

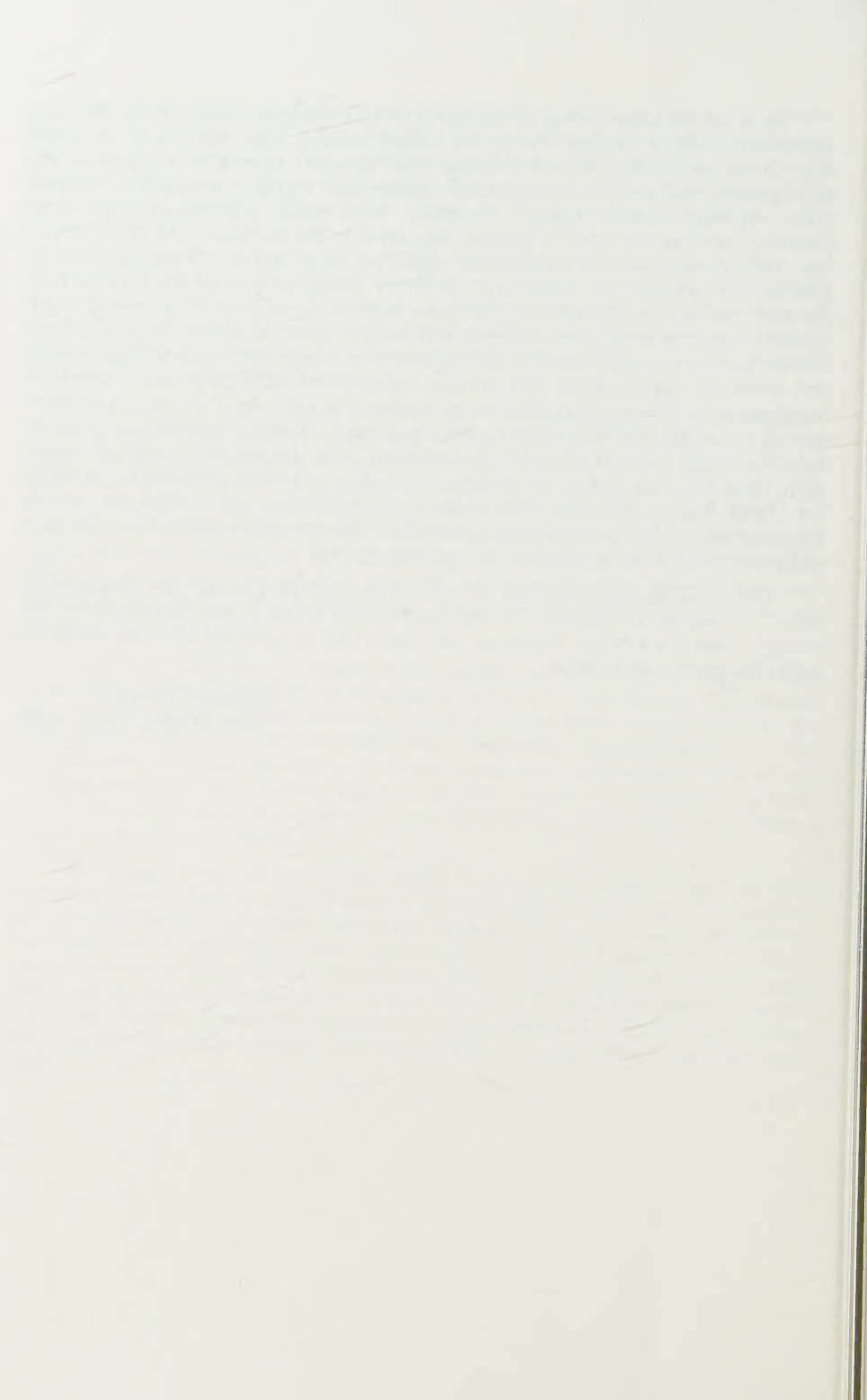
Enquiry accords less attention to the question of how radicals might attain power than to the problem of what happens to radicals once they do achieve success. The impotence of the powerless seems to worry them much less than the corruptions of the powerful. They suffer no "illusion that the elimination of fetters on production through the action of a centralized state bureaucracy will in itself advance society or the cause of liberty," and they display a refreshing awareness that bureaucratic abuse and autocratic centralization are dangers to which even a Socialist state might succumb.

To be sure, a few of them, such as Roy Curtis, cling to the simple solutions found in Lenin's *State and Revolution*. Control would be exercised "continuously and directly" by the "collective rule of the masses." All workers would understand the "character of the social process" and would actually administer it, and so on. Change the social and material conditions of men's lives, Louis Clair argues, and a better human nature will eventually evolve, thereby solving the problems of power, favoritism, conflict, centralized management, the allocation of goods and services, and the problem of priorities. "Cultural optimism" must replace "cultural pessimism."

Some of the others, such as the editor, Philip Selznick, offer a more skeptical appreciation of the problem facing the future Socialist state. He is not convinced that under socialism men will abandon their personal ambitions, competitiveness and egoisms, and evolve into empathetic, cooperative creatures incapable of bureaucratic exploitation and political despotism. Since power will always have to be exercised by ordinary men, it follows that even in the Socialist state "only power can check power, and the existence of opposing social forces is a necessary condition for the existence of democracy." It is not enough to rely on the good will of the new leaders, and because of this there must be some kind of systematic check against oligarchic tendencies. Selznick envisions a mixed economy, including some private sectors in small industry and agriculture, along with independent worker and consumer organizations that exercise independent political power. Large-scale organization will be unavoidable in a modern Socialist state; to control it there must be a place for independent pressure groups, dissent, factionalism, lobbying and other such features of political democracy. The dangers of centralized power stem from the very nature of modern technology, whether capitalist or socialist; for Marge Ratner, only the decentralization of production and control can provide the safeguard. The state monopoly should be the exception rather than the rule, and power should be exercised at the community level.

Today substantial numbers of our youth are questioning the fundamental values of American society. To the extent that *Enquiry* was interested in the struggle "not for a better living but for a new life" it may still have something to say to the present generation.

—Michael Parenti
New Haven, Conn., 1968





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